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SUBJECT: VICE PRESIDENT HASHIMI ON BASRA OPERATIONS,
COUNTERING IRANIAN INFLUENCE

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Patricia A. Butenis for reasons 1.4 (b)
) and (d).

Summary

11. (S) During an April 1 meeting, the Ambassador and Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi discussed the situation in Basra and the aftermath of the recent showdown with Sadrists forces there. Hashimi described how he had supported PM Maliki during the Basra campaign, putting personal differences aside to safeguard national interests. The PM's unilateral, uncoordinated moves, though, would have to be addressed by the national leadership once the Political Committee for National Security and the Executive Council are convened. Hashimi railed against pernicious Iranian influence in the country, calling for "reciprocal punishment" to repel its interference inside Iraq. The Armed Forces, too, must be professionalized to protect national, versus sectarian, interests and militias must be dissolved. Respect for the nation's security, he said, was what he tried to impress on Sadrists representatives when he met with them on March 28. Hashimi also complained of a lack of support from neighboring Arab states in Iraq's struggle against Iran, particularly Saudi Arabia. End summary.

12. (C) The Ambassador was joined by NSC Senior Director for Iraq and Afghanistan, Brett McGurk, Special Assistant Ali Khedery, and Poloff (note-taker). The VP was joined by Political Advisors Khalil al-Ezzawi and Saif Abdul Rahman. The meeting was held in the Baghdad compound of Jalal Talabani where the VP and senior staff have been staying since a mortar attack on his IZ office on March 28 killed and wounded many of his security agents.

Political Aftermath of Basra Campaign

13. (S) After expressing condolences for the deaths of three of VP Hashimi's security detail from a March 28 mortar barrage that struck his International Zone office, the Ambassador sought Hashimi's views on the Basra campaign and its political ramifications. Hashimi said he was urging President Talabani and VP Abdel-Mehdi to return to Baghdad at once, to address the serious political ramifications of the Basra campaign and its aftermath. Hashimi said he refused Abdel-Mehdi's suggestion that he come to Irbil for meetings ("to hell with that, I told him"), and reiterated the urgent need to convene the Political Council for National Security (PCNS) in Baghdad to chart the way forward. Hashimi noted that his plans to depart Iraq for the U.S., Europe and regional capitals might have to be delayed (Note: His staff later called to confirm the VP's decision to delay the trip. End note).

14. (S) Hashimi said that he and his colleagues had "taken a

hard choice to support the PM in fulfilling his "mission" in Basra, leaving political differences aside in recognition of broader national interests. Hashimi said he had been in touch several times with the PM during and since the crisis, even offering to join Maliki in Basra (the PM declined the offer). Maliki, he said, put himself "in a corner," in full light of all Iraqis. Despite the PM's refusal to consult other leaders ahead of the operation, "we decided to not make this a personal issue," he said. "We will have to sit face to face with him soon to discuss events," but for now we must support the PM and his objectives. Still, military means are insufficient to address the present political situation. It will take years to address the problems in Basra and tackle the complex political, social, and economic dimensions to the situation, he said. We must devise a package of achievable objectives, to allow the PM to save face, and the Iraqi Security Forces and Coalition to follow up to ensure success. Then, he added, we need to re-evaluate the entire Iraqi political situation to determine how to build a functioning central government and regain the post-Surge momentum.

Iranian Interference Unacceptable

15. (S) The interference by Iran and other neighbors into Iraqi affairs was unacceptable, Hashimi railed, and must be repulsed. The Vice President asked rhetorically what the U.S. would do to help the GOI protect its borders, and help rid the Iraqi government of "pro-Iranian cabinet members" supportive of Tehran's agenda. The U.S./Europe fight with Iran over the nuclear file, he said, can no longer be transferred into Iraq. We must act in concert with the U.S. and Arab allies to confront Iranian interference in Iraq,

BAGHDAD 00001051 002 OF 002

responding in kind if Tehran takes harmful steps, he said. "If Iran is now the major player in Iraq, he warned obliquely, I will have to be pragmatic and assess what sort of 'life-saving chances' we have before us." Hashimi said there could no longer be business as usual; if the Iranians do something negative in Iraq, we must take "reciprocal steps to punish them."

16. (S) It is shocking, Hashimi continued, that armed sectarian militias were simply absorbed into the Iraqi Security Forces but not neutralized as militias. The ISF requires professionalism to safeguard national security. No one, the U.S. and UK included, he complained, is "taking care" of this issue adequately. The UK built our national Army, he continued, but has ignored the issue since the start of this war. The Army must be rebuilt, the Badr Brigade must be dissolved, and the PM cannot be allowed to "kidnap the future of this country."

Hashimi Warns Sadrists to Stand Down

17. (S) Hashimi said that in his March 28 meeting with a delegation of Sadr leaders (led by Nassar and Hassan al-Rubaie), he told them that they have a key decision to make. If the events in Basra provokes a civil war, he told them, Hashimi and his colleagues would blame the Sadrists for starting it. The time was now to support the PM, to sit down and talk through their complaints, he told them. Hashimi said he believed his admonishment may have led to the public order by Moqtadad Sadr to his followers to lay down their arms and cease the violence. The Ambassador thanked Hashimi for his stance and his efforts aimed at restoring order. Unity of purpose among Iraqi patriots, he said, was the key to challenging Iranian trouble-making and to rebuilding the country. Iran would surely continue efforts to destabilize Iraq, but it could never "take over" its Arab neighbor. The GOI must unify around national interests, eliminate extremists, and work to split reasonable Sadrists from the

Special Groups and adherents of violence. Encouragingly, the ISF has found its feet in the past few days, taking back checkpoints and the Om Qasr Port in Basra, he added. As in Lebanon, the Ambassador cautioned, Iran worked to pit groups (i.e., Shias) against each other to maximize its pernicious influence; they are taking the same tack in Iraq.

Saudis Out To Lunch

18. (S) The Ambassador remarked on the virtual silence of Arab states on recent events and the lack of Arab support to the GOI in light of its confrontation with Iran. Responding to the Ambassador's advice to press Arab capitals to step up to the task, Hashimi said he was in touch recently with the Saudi Foreign Minister at the OIC Summit in Senegal. Though the Saudi prince professed to fully comprehend the challenges in Iraq, the al-Saud he said, were frozen in place by their disdain toward Maliki personally. Hashimi sought USG help in convincing the Saudis and others to alter their approach. The Egyptian President and other Arab leaders had promised to send Ambassadors to Baghdad, but had not followed through.
BUTENIS